

Four Ways to Breathe

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From America, land of milk and honey, slides giftlike into view a new book from Diana Wynne Jones, *A Sudden Wild Magic* (Avonova/William Morrow, \$22), flowing into the mind like liquid glass, befriendingly. It is marketed for adults, but seems very much of a piece with her work as a whole, almost all of which has been published for teenagers. If there is something whirligig about the clarity of that work – if she sometimes over-indulges in timeslip and/or alternate-reality plot pretzels – there has been at the same time throughout her career an abiding sense of narrative good will: in *A Sudden Wild Magic* the protagonists somehow behave as though they were eager to help us through the maze, no matter how entangled they may find themselves in the hooks and ladders of a story which tends to mock synopsis. This sense that a book partners its readers may be one way of describing a book which has been written for a younger audience; and it is true that, now and then in *A Sudden Wild Magic*, actions and their actors seem marginally too knowable for comfort, after the fashion of narratives which seek to bond with their readers: but the gladness wins through.

The plot is not simple, and it would be easy to mock some of the direr codicils that tongue-tie some of the patters of description, through which is unfolded for us a pixilated concatenation of quasi-inter/intra-nested universes, ours being one. Earth – but most particularly Britain – has long benefited from the monitoring activities of a Ring of workers in magic, who have done the sums for us, kept the balances from going too far awry, and generally cushioned the planet – but most particularly Britain, which is monitored by a particularly efficient Ring – from disaster. But nowadays things seem to be going slightly sour – it is a sign of the comfortingness of *A Sudden Wild Magic* that global warming is allowed to stand as the main problem facing us, even here in Bat the Snatcher's Solitude Called Peace – and a computer boffin wizard named Mark Lister, who is high in the Ring, begins to understand that the late 20th-century Earth is being haemorrhaged by an unknown force. We soon learn that Arth, one of the systems adjacent to ours, has been

for centuries siphoning off the precious bodily fluids of Earthly ingenuity, and that this adjacent community has in fact created global warming to inspire us into attempting to cure the problem. (At this point, one does begin to feel, while bonding into this book, rather like an ostrich bonding into sand.) Whatever, Mark Lister tells the rest of the Ring what's on; and the Ring gets down to work.

The rest of the novel, set mostly on Arth, depicts with ingenuity and warmth and the occasional knotted shoelace how the task force from Earth deals with the exceedingly complex geo-political situation obtaining in the pirate world, which includes several kingdoms, a couple of politically-empowered affinity groups defined by species and/or magical ability, and a kind of orbital arcology, hoisted up and kept up in space by magic. It is from this arcology, run like a sex-shy monastery by a muck-is-brass mage deaf to the pleasure principle, that the thefts from Earth have been taking place. There is very little advantage in trying to detail precisely how the large cast manages to reach the end of the book from this point: but wise sex comes into it; and rebellion; and a wizened but ultimately prepotent king from Arth puts his foot down; and centaurs contribute; and an evil witch is defeated by a combo of lovers and wise beings; and the gods take a part.

The most interesting character is the seeming old maid from Earth who is the most potent member of the Ring, and whose sapient natter makes sense of everything else. A reasonably good time is had by all. There is a sense of solace and plenitude and easy breathing throughout, sustaining the funhouse plot, reminding numerous deuteragonists to pull their socks up and get on with loving the immanent worlds and the opposite sex. It is a seasoned romp. Echoes of E.R. Eddison's Zimiamvian Trilogy may be harkened to, smilingly, by the burdened reader. Everyone else may percolate in this rare peace.

Less lacking in joy than last time, Tom Holt pulls up his socks, clenches his loins, gives birth to another comic novel, *Overtime* (Little Brown, £14.99). It has little of the

equipoise and flow of his two-volume sequence of non-genre books – comprising *Goatsong* (1989) and *The Walled Orchard* (1990) – about the historical Greek playwright Eupolis; nor has he yet returned to the intermittent flowing highs of *Expecting Someone Taller* (1987) or *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* (1988). But although it sounds like faint praise to say so, *Overtime* is very much better than either *Flying Dutch* (1991) or *Ye Gods!* (1992), both of which read like Mike Gatting telling us, through the tetanus of his jaw, that South Africa was a picnic. From Holt's bad books, two things were missing: love of the world created; and a protagonist so fully part of the created world that love could sow through the chaff of jokes.

We cannot ask of Tom Holt that (like Terry Pratchett) he write as if he loved the world he made, though we can suggest to him that love does make the worlds go round; but we can say that the lack of an embedded protagonist, being clearly deliberate, is clearly subject to comment. Holt's books are comedies of displacement and incongruity: against the modern world (in which we meet a nebbish protagonist who becomes embroiled in the brouhaha) will be juxtaposed the German pantheon, or the Flying Dutchman, or (in the tale on review) Blondel. A three-legged race through Bedlam then ensues, with the protagonist protesting, feebly, throughout that it's all a bit much, chaps. There are jokes, some of them physical, some of them verbal; but few sustained flights of anything like lunacy or the flashes of theodicy that make a Wodehouse or a Pratchett glow, at moments, as though they were wise to the lures of maya: and wed maya: and lived in the glade with maya. So far, with Holt, the end of the tale marks a return to something like normalcy, or dust. It is a letting-down prefigured throughout by the gridded teeth of the telling.

But this time, for pages on end, we slip off the squirrel-wheel of fire, and paddle along in the midst of the tale, almost up to our necks in something very much like fleuve. Blondel has extracted the usual Holt protagonist from certain death in a World War Two bomber, and sidles up and down the timelines with him in search of Richard the Lion Heart, who is depicted by Holt in the style of the Robin Hood legends (as a wise and humble monarch) rather than according to the more normal (post-Hood) consensus (as a spendthrift and hysterical bozo); as a fictional character, however, this Richard is as close to a wise person Holt has yet wished to give us. The cast is huge, the story immensely complicated, the funny bits much less intermittent than previously. There are moments of stress, when protagonist Guy Goodlet all too

lanugo grew sparse and now, reaching puberty, he began to sprout adult hair, axillary and pubic hair of course, and also an adult's beard, but... when you looked close you could see it wasn't right. Where a waz-ho-don's beard grew only on his throat, Baby's beard was spreading up onto his cheeks and under his nose. The tor-o-don, male and female, had hair on their faces. And everywhere else.

The appearance of that hair meant something else as well: in another year, or two at the outside, they would have to go into tor-o-don territory and capture a couple of females for Baby. That would invest him with a man's estate, and it would be best for him to have two females, just like all the other men. Baby was sensitive; having less than any of the others would hurt his feelings.

Baby. That was another thing that bothered Om-at. Baby lacked a waz-ho-don name. But names came from females, and the tor-o-don females couldn't speak.

One day, when the three of them were out hunting, they followed antelope spoor down stream, skirting the edge of O-lo-a's territory, sneaking up on the herd, keeping them down wind, hunting the way lions hunted, staying alert. The antelopes were grazing, and they were alone. This was border territory and, absent of cat predators, they'd be unwary. Sometimes, when there were waz-ho-don about, the antelopes would stick around baboon tribes, relying on the baboon sentries to warn them of danger. There were so many people in the valley now it was getting harder to hunt. The animals were easily spooked.

They spread out in the long grass, creeping closer, picking out fawns and yearlings they might be able to catch, each with a sharp-edged cobble, each with a long stick. They tried to be quiet, but the grass was unusually dry, dead thatch crackling softly every time they moved. The antelopes were getting nervous, looking around suspiciously. Still, so long as they didn't smell anything...

One of them stotted suddenly, bounding high in the air, spotted them, and, by the time it hit the ground again, was starting to run. The herd milled, panicky, getting ready to flee.

Om-at snarled and barked, "Go!" The three of them burst from concealment, running after the fleeing animals. For a few brief seconds they got closer, relying on a biped's superior manoeuvrability and acceleration, then the antelopes started to pull away, never coming within reach of a stick. Om-at started to pull up, knowing it was fruitless, then Ta-den. Baby, still a child, continued to run.

Om-at shouted, "Baby!"

And Baby stopped, screaming with frustration, dropped his stick, drew back his arm and threw the killing stone overhand. It bounced off the little straggler he was after, stunning it momentarily, spindly legs flailing in the air. Baby hurled himself on the antelope, pounding it to death with his fists, screeching with excitement. It was his first solitary kill.

Om-at and Ta-den walked up, looking down at Baby and his kill. Ta-den picked up the cobble and hefted it. "Throw..."

Om-at nodded. Everyone knew you could throw things. That was how you were supposed to protect yourself from leopards, who could follow you right

